

11.30.07: SD Union Op-Ed: Going green from the ground up

Going green from the ground up

John Garamendi

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The recent Southern California wildfires were devastating, consuming lives, communities, homes and irreplaceable memories. While affected homeowners look to the daunting task of rebuilding their homes and their lives, global climate change is likely the last thing on their minds. But the fires offer good reasons for considering the effects of climate change, and perhaps more important, considering how we can help curb global warming.

Scientists agree that climate change is real and the resulting higher temperatures and droughts increase the threat of wildfires in the West. Yet in the path of these devastating fires, Southern California homeowners have the opportunity to rebuild in a way that both reduces the fire threat and ensures a healthy California environment.

A month since the wildfires began, communities, local officials and state and local agencies have coordinated their efforts to remove ash and debris from the fire areas in the most efficient ways possible, saving time, money and curbing insurance fraud. Now, affected communities should pool their ideas, talents and resources and begin building fire-safe, sustainable structures. Working together, communities can receive the maximum leverage from subsidies available for alternative energy and energy efficiency, and minimize the environmental impact of rebuilt structures.

Valuable lessons have been learned from the fires of Oakland, San Diego and Southern California, and we must take those lessons and put them into action. To that end, local governments should make information available and offer incentives for fire-safe construction, including concrete siding for exterior walls, double-pane windows, fire-resistant roofing, safe siting and defensible space.

As California's population continues to increase under the threat of global warming, water availability and use remains a primary concern on the minds of policy-makers. As the Sierra snowpack declines, the Sacramento Delta shrinks and our groundwater degrades, water-efficiency measures will be increasingly important. Homeowners can do their part by combining modern appliances and plumbing fixtures with mandatory zero-or low-water-use landscaping and native flora. Efficient low-use drip systems and efficient and safe methods of recycling water are also important for homeowners wanting to do their part in going green.

Homeowners have the opportunity to make new homes as energy efficient as current technology allows. To that end, the efficiency requirements included in new Title 24 building codes are an excellent start, but to achieve the most energy savings and the least environmental impact, homeowners can look to the highest Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards.

The California Public Utilities Commission and the Energy Commission have been adding surcharges to the utility bills of Californians for decades. These are intended to help California reach its goal of using at least 20 percent renewable energy by 2020. Starting from the ground up, homeowners have the golden opportunity to deploy alternative sources of energy. Roof-top solar photovoltaic systems, passive solar systems, solar water heating and wind systems are alternative sources that are eco-friendly and have long-term cost saving benefits because the fuel is free.

With new construction, there may also be opportunities for small generation energy sources that could serve a collection of homes, rather than including separate systems at every site. Utility companies that administer these programs and are replacing some of their existing damaged distribution infrastructure have the chance to work with local communities to creatively increase alternative energy.

Earning incentives to encourage energy efficiency in residential and commercial structures, these companies are in a great position to lead a community-wide effort to assure the best techniques and systems are adopted. With the cooperation of contractors, economies of scale can bring down costs of rebuilding and retrofitting homes. Communities in the United Kingdom have adopted this model and serve as working examples of the endless possibilities available when communities share their resources and make a commitment to alternative energy sources.

As the rebuilding phase begins, I am hopeful the impacted communities will work with solid waste managers to clear and rebuild with a focus on zero waste, recycle whatever is salvageable during debris removal and build with new materials that are non-toxic, long-lasting and reusable.

As the fifth-largest economy in the world and historically an environmental leader to the world, California has a golden opportunity to prove itself once again — from devastation to rebuilding cleaner and greener than ever. Global climate change reminds us we are all interconnected, that our energy use and consumption patterns impact the entire planet.

A clean, green new start is only possible when we all work together: representatives from the Governor's Office, local and regional elected officials, state and local water and land-management experts, utility and insurance companies, contractors and their trade associations. We must act now, and we must act together to rebuild our Southern California communities to ensure a healthy California tomorrow.